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A FIRST-GRADE EXPERIMENT

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I. DESCRIPTION OF GENERAL EXPERIMENT

Recognizing the fact that the growing demand of this age is for leaders, men and women of purpose, initiative, and originality, and that the formal recitation offers but little opportunity for the development of these characteristics, tending as it does, to make followers rather than leaders, an experiment was made in an effort to provide just such an opportunity. An average first-grade class of forty pupils was given one hour three days a week, in which the children were left to choose and plan their own work or play. They were placed in an environment of materials, such as seemed best fitted to the needs of the six-year-old child. The equipment, however, was quite simple, as there was no fund upon which to draw for materials. There were the materials regularly furnished by the school board—books, crayons, scissors, pencils, paper (writing, drawing, cutting, and construction), paste, rulers, clay, inch cubes, weaving materials (cardboard looms and jute yarn), chalk, and blackboards. The rest of the equipment was either donated or purchased at the ten cent store—a large ball, three sets of dominoes, one set of lottos, two bean-bags, six dolls of different sizes with extra doll clothes, a doll bed and hammock, needles, thread, and scraps of dress goods and muslin.

The children's attention was called to the materials which were placed about the room. They were told that they might choose their own work or play for one hour and that any or all of the material was at their disposal. One rule was made by the teacher before work was begun, i.e., at the sound of a chord struck upon the piano all work must be stopped immediately and attention given the teacher. When the signal to go to work was given, the opportunity was received differently by different children. Some were enthusiastic and wasted no time in finding something to do. Others seemed bewildered and, even after being coaxed out of their

seats, wandered about aimlessly only to return again to their seats like the caged bird, who, after having been set free, goes back to its cage. The third or fourth day, however, found everyone busy at some task.

During this time difficulties arose. There was but one ball and many children wanted it. Those playing bean-bag knocked down the fort being built with inch cubes. There were three spools of thread, of which three little girls took possession, while others clamored for thread. A dozen swarmed about the jar of clay, pushing and pulling each other so that none could get clay. The rule of the teacher was resorted to. The chord was struck on the piano, the attention of the children was secured, and then the teacher had the children state the difficulties and asked what ought to be done about them. A class discussion followed, which ended in the making of rules which best solved the problems. Every difficulty, as it arose from day to day, was handled in the same manner. Very soon the following rules were set up:

1. Every child must work or play in a way so as not to disturb any other child.
2. All materials must be put back in place when a child has finished with them. (This includes the replacing of the spools of thread upon the window-sill each time a piece is taken from them.)
3. Any child wishing material already in use must find something else to do until the one using the desired material has finished with it.
4. When many want the same kind of material, for example, clay or paper, get into line.
5. When any child wastes or destroys materials, a nurse should be appointed by the teacher to watch him.
6. Anyone unable to find something to do will be assigned work.

Every instance of the breaking of a rule was brought before the class and the class meted out the punishment. The sense of fairness with which the children judged cases and their wisdom in choosing a logical and natural punishment for each offense was quite remarkable. In one instance only did they show poor judgment, and this was probably due to race prejudice.

Gradually the children learned the meaning of freedom under law, learned that their liberty must necessarily be limited by the group interest. This led to a consciousness of the rights of others. Self-control, adaptation, and co-operation were learned not through dissertations, but through practice in controlling and adapting self

and in co-operating with others. Those powers which go toward making character were exercised. Inhibition and impulse became properly balanced. The timid child ventured out of self, gaining courage and self-reliance, when pressure from without was removed. The overly impulsive one learned through unpleasant experience the need of controlling his impulses. As the work progressed, the children became less and less conscious of the rules, and toward the close of the year it was seldom necessary to refer to them at all.

Most gratifying, too, was the contentment and pleasure with which the children worked. There was unusual concentration and persistence in the face of difficulties. Not only the best habits of thought and study, but also knowledge and skill were acquired in a degree that is impossible with the kind of attention we get in the formal recitation.

The place of the teacher during the hour was an inconspicuous one. She moved quietly about the room, answering questions, giving help when help was desired, making suggestions in such a way that the children felt free to reject them, if they chose (and they did choose occasionally), and trying to guide their activities and interests leading them into profitable channels. At the close of each period the children were gathered about her, the roll was called, and each child told how he had used his time, and showed, when possible, the product of his work. The group discussed it, making suggestions for improvements and further possibilities. It was often during this discussion period that purposes were formed for the next free-work period. It was during this discussion period, too, that the shiftless inclination of six children began to be noticed. Three of them were immature children, the other three very capable ones. While they did not disturb in any way, they wasted a great deal of time and seldom had anything to show the group. This caused some very original comments on the part of the children. The discussion which followed resulted in the making of the sixth rule. As the privilege of choosing their own work was highly prized by all, it was never necessary to make use of the rule.

A record of the choice of material of each child and the use to which he put it was kept from day to day. A study of the record reveals three things:

1. The interests and needs of the six-year-old child.

2. The stage of development of each individual child.
3. The relative value of materials.

A report for one month reads in part:

Number of times each material was chosen during the month—

Construction paper and paste.....	107
Clay.....	71
Writing materials.....	64
Blackboard and chalk.....	14
Paper and pencil or crayon.....	50
Drawing.....	45
Blackboard and chalk.....	9
Paper and crayons.....	36
Blocks (inch cubes with few possibilities).....	26
Books.....	18
Lottos.....	10
Sewing materials.....	10
Bean-bags.....	11
Weaving materials.....	9
Paints.....	7
Ball.....	7
Dominoes.....	4
Picture-puzzles.....	3
Dolls.....	2

From this it would be reasonable to conclude that construction work best meets the child's inner need. He is interested not in the attractiveness of materials, but in what he can do with them. For this reason the ball, the dolls, cubes, etc., while popular in the beginning, later were seldom touched, while the materials possessing greater possibilities, as clay and paper, became increasingly popular. It was only the immature child who chose material for its appearance. After choosing the brightly colored squares of paper, for example, he would finger them, fold them and cut or tear them aimlessly, seldom doing much with them. This, no doubt, meant growth for this child, though a very different stage of growth from that brought about by the construction work of the more mature children. The following list will show the trend of their thinking. Flowers, valentines, doll hats, paper-dolls, borders, doll furniture, baskets, envelopes, pinwheels, houses, aeroplanes, guns, tents, soldiers, bridges, and books were made of paper. Of clay they made marbles, beads, dishes, jardinier and stand, helmets, battleships, automobiles, submarines, torpedoes, steamboats, trenches, inclines and car-tracks, skiffs, bird-houses, and well-

boxes. Those choosing to sew made doll dresses, doll towels, a doll pillow, a doll coat, and marble bags. The subjects chosen in drawing and painting were scenes, birds, flowers, houses, rug designs, Easter nest and rabbit, tents, flags, soldiers, aeroplanes, and automobiles. They took much delight, also, in coloring the marbles, beads, and dishes made of clay. The written work included names, addresses, letters of the alphabet, figures from one to one hundred, addition problems (ones far in advance of first-grade work), lists of phonetic words, lists of the names of the Red Cross members, and groups of sentences which they called "stories" and which were written and illustrated in "story books." These were booklets made by the children by folding and sewing together several sheets of 9×12 paper. On the outside was placed an appropriate title and cover design. Number games were played with the bean-bags and scores kept on the blackboard. The books most often read were the *Bobby and Betty* and *Free and Treadwell* primers. Chairs were placed in a circle and called our "reading circle." Those wishing to read would go to this circle, decide what was to be read, and with the help of the student-teacher, the interest would often be kept up for the entire hour. Of course, anyone had the privilege of leaving the circle, at any time, which some did.

II. OBSERVATIONS ON SPECIAL CHILDREN DURING THE PROGRESS OF THE WORK

Abe, whose record is quite interesting, is a nervous, impulsive child with little or no home training. He was frequently before the group. Repeatedly knocking the ball out of the hands of a little girl who was bouncing it, was his first offense. The children dealt leniently with him, deciding that he should not be punished this time. It was the child who had made the complaint against him, who suggested that he be given "another chance." This experience, though humiliating, did not have a lasting effect upon Abe's conduct. Several days later he kicked a child who was working quietly at his desk with material that Abe wanted. Two of our rules were thus broken; so the class decided that both his freedom and the privilege of working be taken from him the rest of the period. The punishment was keenly felt. He went to his seat, put his head down upon his desk and scarcely looked up until the period was over. The effect of this experience upon Abe's

self-control was noticeable for some time. It was not, however, the last of his offenses, but they became fewer, and the intervals between them longer, until Abe finally learned to work as peaceably as the other children.

Abe's choice of work was often interesting, also. One day I noticed him trying to sew a button on his waist up near the collar. He was always carelessly dressed. Often there were scarcely enough buttons on his clothes to hold them together. On this particular morning the one button on the front of his waist had come off and he was doing his best to replace it, but was not succeeding very well. I told him that I did not think he could do it that way, and suggested that he go into the cloakroom, slip off his waist, put his coat back on and come out into the room and I would show him how to sew the button on. He was delighted with the idea, carried out the suggestion, and at the close of the period was proud of the button on the front of his waist. The incident caused considerable amusement among the children, but I tried to make them feel that it was ever so much better for even a boy to sew on a button than to go without. Since then, Abe and several other boys have reported sewing buttons on at home.

Robert's record is an illustration of the development of initiative. He spent his first hours of free-work in watching other children. Later he announced that he was helping them. His help amounted to little more than holding, feeling, and patting the object the other child was working on. One day I noticed for the first time that Robert was alone at his own desk with a piece of clay. He squeezed it, pushed his fingers into it, rolled it, and pulled it, breaking it into small pieces. When the roll was called that day, he reported that he had tried to make something but couldn't. The following day found him busy again with the clay. When asked what he was going to make, he said he didn't know. At the close of that period, however, he had something to show the class, although it needed labeling—the Kaiser's helmet. Then followed helmet after helmet until the Kaiser had quite a supply. A question or two as to how the Kaiser's helmet differed from the American helmet suggested the making of the latter. Then naturally came guns, torpedoes, tanks, aeroplanes, etc. While his work is still very crude, Robert has learned to definitely purpose and plan before he begins his work.

The free-work period has helped to reveal the interests of individual children. Mary is a large girl of eight years. She made her third attempt to attend school this year. She is afflicted with St. Vitus dance and both last year and the year before was compelled to give up school. Her health has been better this year and she has attended regularly, though she still gets very nervous over her work. When given the opportunity to choose her own work, this child showed unusual interest and ability in costume designing. She made a paper doll, then planned and worked out many different outfits, showing good taste in the choice of trimmings and color schemes. She seemed to be much more at ease and under much less of a strain than in the regular recitation period.

Of all the children to be most pitied and helped, it seems to me, is the timid child. Rose was an extreme case. When the opportunity for free-work was given, she immediately fled to the basement and did not reappear until the hour was over. It was not noticed until the children were required to account for their time. Then it was intentionally passed over without comment; but the next day she was refused permission to leave the room, when she again asked to do so at the beginning of the period. Quickly and nervously she chose a piece of paper and crayons, got as far away from the other children as possible, and worked until time for the discussion, when she again asked permission to leave the room. It was granted and nothing was thought of her absence when her name was called until it happened regularly for more than a week. We then insisted on her staying in the room and showing her work at the proper time. We mentioned all the good things about it and praised her efforts. It pleased her and from then on she began to display more confidence. She moved freely about the room, tried the different materials, discussed with other children her own and their work, asked questions, and showed with pleasure and pride whatever she had made.

One of the many problems of the teacher has been what to do with the child who persists in repeating an activity over and over again. We know that the baby's³ pounding a spoon upon anything it can reach brings about growth, but for a limited time only. After he has learned the characteristics of the objects about him, space relationships, adjustment of eye and hand, etc., to continue pounding would have no value. The same is true of some of the activities chosen in the free-period. Shall we permit Edward, for

example, to build a fort of inch cubes identically the same day after day? After trying in vain to lead him by means of suggestion to something else or, at least, to a variation, I finally forbade him to make the same thing again. Should I have felt, instead, that as long as he persisted in the activity, there must have been something in it necessary to his inner development, though I could not see it? In other cases it was not so much a question of growth, but of the wisdom of growth in one direction only. Should Ruth be permitted to read day after day and never attempt anything else? Should Daniel go on playing a bean-bag number game after he has become very accurate in working with numbers and keeping score? Should Virginia continue to paint scenes (sky, grass, and tree) after she has learned to do it as well as a six-year child can be expected to do it? I did not interfere in the first two cases. In the last, however, after suggestion failed to bring desired results, I told her that she must not paint another scene, that she had learned to do that very well and must now try to do something else. She then chose a pink from a vase and painted it very well, seeming as well satisfied with it as with the scene. Then came the question.—Ought she be permitted to do nothing but paint? I have failed to come to any conclusion. Happily, such cases are the exception rather than the rule.

The experiment has revealed, too, the teacher's needs. This kind of work requires keen observation, an understanding of the way in which the child-mind works, a broader knowledge of the studies of the curriculum, and a very different type of preparation from that necessary for the formal recitation. The teacher must plan for each child individually. She must know on what level each is mentally, physically, and morally, just what his native powers and tendencies are, in which direction they tend to grow, to what degree undesirable impulses have been suppressed, desirable ones encouraged, and which need redirection. She ought to learn his interests and be able to foresee possible directions which his activities are liable to take and plan how best to lead them into that which society has chosen out of race experience as most worth while. When the child chooses a very different course from that anticipated by the teacher, it becomes necessary to make the adjustment quickly and meet the unexpected situation wisely and tactfully.

In the free period we have the ideal situation of the question coming from the child, which makes a thorough equipment on the part of the teacher important. One group, for example, wants to know about the bee that has just flown into the room, then about the flower upon which it has lighted. Another asks to be shown how to make a doll dress, another wants a torpedo drawn upon the blackboard—that he may model one of clay, another asks about the shape and details of a submarine, another wants help in constructing an aeroplane, another in weaving a rug or hammock, etc. The questions come from all imaginable fields and the broader the teacher's knowledge in each field, the more profitable will be the hour. My lack of knowledge, for example, of aeroplanes, submarines, and instruments of warfare made it impossible for me to promote growth along those lines. The children worked out their own impressions over and over again, always getting the same crude results, whereas, with the proper suggestion and help each attempt might have been an improvement upon the previous one.